FOURTH CHURCH PULPIT
December 9, 2001

THE PEACE OF GOD
John M. Buchanan

We can be sure that wherever the work of justice, freedom and enlightenment is being done, the initiative for the work and the power for the work come from the Holy Spirit. Wherever people bravely bear witness to the truth, whenever people lay down their lives for one another, there the Spirit of God is operative.... God's realm is not confined to the church. The world is the realm of God. Who, as Holy Spirit, is inspiring and empowering wherever the Spirit sees fit. In other words, the Spirit is at work through, outside, and sometimes in spite of the church. The realistic acceptance of this all-too-evident truth need not be a cause for despair. Instead it might save the church from the dangers of grandiosity and pride.... Just as there is not warrant for self-congratulation, there is no reason to fear failure.

Joanna Adams
Hope as the Intractable Resolve of the Spirit

FOURTH
PRESBY
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CHURCH

A LIGHT IN THE CITY

Fourth Presbyterian Church of Chicago
126 East Chestnut Street, Chicago, IL 60611-2094
(312) 787-4570

THE PEACE OF GOD
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JOHN M. BUCHANAN, PASTOR
FOURTH PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Psalm 72:1-7
Isaiah 11:1-9
Matthew 3:1-12

"Keep awake. . . . Be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour."
Matthew 24:42, 44 (NRSV)

Startle us, O God, with your truth, and open our hearts to your word; in Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

The great theologian Karl Barth used to say that a modern Christian should have an open Bible in one hand and a copy of the daily newspaper in the other. I've always thought that was good advice, and I follow it literally on Sunday morning by reading, with my first cup of coffee, the texts we will be using in worship. This morning I read from the eleventh chapter of Isaiah—

> The wolf shall live with the lamb,
> the leopard shall lie with down with the kid,
> the calf and the lion and the fatling together,
> and a little child shall lead them. . . .
> They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain

That's what the prophet Isaiah said 700 years before the birth of Jesus.

The headlines in the newspaper this morning read:

> Shifting Fronts, Rising Danger: The Afghanistan War Evolves
>
> Nuclear Experts in Pakistan May Have Links to Al Qaeda

That's what the headlines say in the Sunday newspaper, December 9, 2001.

It is a season of dramatic contrasts for those of us who will celebrate the birth:

> Between the bright lights of the cultural year-end festival and the quiet, poignant Advent hymns about lonely exile;
>
> Between the urgency to work overtime to get it all done by December 24—every present purchased, cards addressed and mailed, trees decorated, parties attended—and the invitation to wait quietly and hopefully for something that is not yet here.

But perhaps no Christmas contrast is more profound than the biblical vision of God's peace and the reality of the world in which we live.

For more than two thousand years, Christians have been telling the story and celebrating the birth of the one called the Prince of Peace in particularly nonpeaceful circumstances. Dietrich Bonhoeffer in his Nazi prison cell, in 1943, writing to his fiancée, Maria von Wedemeyer:

> My dearest Maria, . . . by the time you receive this letter it will probably be Advent, a time especially dear to me. A prison cell like this, in which one watches and hopes and performs this or that ultimately insignificant task, and in which one is wholly dependent on the doors being opened from the outside, is far from an inappropriate metaphor for Advent. (21 November 1943, *Love Letters from Cell 92,* p. 118)

And a generation earlier, German and American and British troops observing a cease-fire and singing across the desolate, devastated several hundred yards between the trenches— known as No Man's Land—"Stille Nacht, Heilige Nacht," "Silent Night, Holy Night." Confederate and Union troops meeting after dark to sing carols and exchange gift souvenirs around a common campfire. In his recent book, *Christmas in Plains,* former President Jimmy Carter tells about spending Christmas at sea, aboard an American submarine, patrolling in the Pacific Ocean on Christmas Eve, and meeting with a few other officers and crew members to read the Bible story of Jesus' birth, sitting between the forward torpedo tubes, loaded with lethally powerful weapons of war.

Among the contrasts of this amazing season, none is more striking, nor more unsettling, than the biblical motif of peace—peace on earth, goodwill among all people, the Prince of Peace—and the reality of the world in which we live, made even more striking this year, this Advent, as American service personnel stand in harm's way, are wounded and killed, and as American bombers continue their attacks, and as we experience our nation at war against terrorism.

We read this morning the vision of God's peaceable kingdom in the book of the prophet Isaiah. It is a peace and tranquility that so captivated the imagination of the nineteenth-century American artist Edward Hicks that he painted the scene—the Peaceable Kingdom—100 times. It is a vision of God's creation restored: a wolf resting beside a lamb, a leopard lying down with a kid, a calf and a lion together, an infant plays over the den of a poisonous snake. In Hicks's paintings, the eyes of the animals, perpetual enemies, predators and prey, are large, wide open, innocent, vulnerable, in amazement—as they should be—at this unlikely tableau.

It is one of the most persistent themes of the Bible. God means for people to live in peace with one another and with the whole creation, God means for the foundations of peace—righteousness and justice—to fill the earth. God has given the creation the means to establish peace. God will not rest until the cause of peace captivates the hearts and minds of everyone—all nations. God will never cease working for peace in the world. God's own son will be called the Prince of Peace.

In the meantime, there is Afghanistan, and the al Qaeda network, and Iraq, and Israel, and Palestine, and Northern Ireland, and Sudan. In the meantime, Woody Allen once observed, "On the day the lion and the lamb lie down together, only the lion is going to get back up."

The gap between vision and reality has been there from the beginning. The Bible does not ignore it. The Bible is not glib about peace and the human prospect. The Isaiah passage of the peaceable kingdom begins with a scene of desolation and devastation, perhaps a battlefield, perhaps the battlefield on which the soldiers of Isaiah's own nation were overwhelmed by the powerful army of Assyria, perhaps the very place where his countrymen, his own friends, were killed or captured. There are no buildings left standing. There are not even any trees left—one of the desolate signatures of war: all the trees are gone. There is only rubble, destruction, ugly dry stumps. The prophet is walking on that battlefield, perhaps. There are tears in his eyes. He is thinking about God's peace and the tragic reality of human history all around him. His eyes fall on a stump—incredibly there is a tiny green shoot emerging. There is something new happening. There is new hope, new possibility, new potential. He hurries to his home and sits down and writes, 700 years before the birth:

> A shoot shall come from the stump of Jesse,
> and a branch shall grow out of his roots.

Jesse, David's father, the dynasty that the people believed bore the presence and blessing and promise of God.

The contrast between the vision and the reality is as old as that. And people of faith have always struggled with the contrast and the moral imperatives that come along with a decision to try to be faithful to God's vision, to try in our lives somehow to contribute to, or at least not distract from, the peace of God.

One of these imperatives is nonviolence, pacifism—a person who wishes to be faithful to God will bear witness and bear the burden of refusing to participate in conflict, refusing to defend country, family, or self violently, convinced that violence is always counterproductive. It is a strong argument. Good, courageous people have made it, lived it, and paid the price for it. Pacifism is, I believe, a noble and important witness that must be made to remind the rest of the world that there are alternatives to war.

But people of faith have arrived at another conclusion. The fourth-century bishop and theologian Augustine argued that war is evil but sometimes, in human history, there are conditions more evil. And, therefore, there is such a thing as necessary conflict and violence, a "Just War" Augustine called it. There are occasions when resorting to force may be a tragic necessity.

Reinhold Niebuhr, one of the most important theologians of the twentieth century came to that same conclusion. After World War I, much of the intelligentsia in the West, appalled at the mindlessness and destructiveness of that conflict, turned to pacifism. And then out of the ashes of that war rose a movement in Austria and Germany called National Socialism— Nazism. Niebuhr saw it coming and changed his mind. Nazism was evil. He wrote, "There are historic situations in

which refusal to defend the inheritance of a civilization, however imperfect, against tyranny and aggression may result in consequences even worse than war" (*Christianity and Crisis,* 10 February 1941). Niebuhr called it "Christian Realism."

So that is the situation in which we find ourselves, anticipating, the birth of the Prince of Peace in Advent 2001—living once again between the vision of God's peaceable kingdom and the reality of the war against terrorism.

Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld keeps reminding us that we are not at war against a nation or a religion but terrorism. And that the struggle will not be over when the Taliban falls or when Osama bin Ladin is caught.

It is a moral imperative—perhaps the flip side of our decision to confront terrorism militarily—to acknowledge that we have responsibility for the conditions that breed terrorism. Fuller Seminary theologian Glen Stassen wrote recently about the conflict we are in: "We need to ask not only if the war in Afghanistan is just but also what practices of prevention can dissuade people from terrorism" (*The Christian Century,* 14 November 2001, p. 24). And that involves issues of hunger, and oil dependence, and political justice—particularly for the Palestinian people—and none of that is it either easy or noncontroversial. In fact, it requires a national and a personal commitment.

A few weeks after September 11, Madeleine Albright, former Secretary of State, spoke at the House of Hope Presbyterian Church in St. Paul, where Linda Loving is the pastor.

Mrs. Albright said,

> There are different ways of waiting. There is waiting without carrying hope within ourselves, sitting—waiting for salvation to come from the outside . . . and there are those who wait with faith and who fight for truth even when they are defeated and beaten back a hundred times. This is the kind of waiting that sends forth seeds out of which change and progress may one day grow. The difference is between waiting for lilies to appear that have never been planted, and doing your utmost to help good seeds find nourishment in rocky soil.

And then Mrs. Albright spoke in the spirit of Advent 2001. She said,

> It is, of course, beyond our power to turn the clock back to before September 11. But we can choose to use the waiting time wisely: to be the doers, not hearers only; to acknowledge the presence of evil, but never lose sight of the good; to endure terrible blows, but never give in to those who would have us betray our principles, or surrender our faith.

It becomes personal—this vision of God's peaceable kingdom. Sometime in the past few weeks, or perhaps the week, most of us have retrieved from storage and reassembled a small replication of the nativity. For many of us, it is one of our family treasures, perhaps passed down from our

childhood, perhaps given to us by dear ones. As we assemble and place the manger somewhere in our homes, we place it, I believe, in our hearts. It is a vision of God's kingdom of peace on earth. It happens in the unlikeliest of places: in Bethlehem, the city of David the king, whose father was Jesse. It is a story we know and love—of a poor, vulnerable, young woman and her husband, traveling a long distance because the most powerful government in the world wants to count and record them; a story about the man and woman having to stay overnight in the stable and their baby being born there. The sheep and cows and lambs are all there—and around the edges of the little tableau, in imagination at least, are the lion and the leopard and the wolf: the whole creation, for this blessed moment, at peace. And as we assemble and place the nativity in our homes and in our hearts, we know that it is about God's intent for creation and for each one of us—God's love appearing in the most unlikely of places, bringing the hope for peace, even in the midst of violence and conflict.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote to Maria: "Just when everything is bearing down on us to such an extent that we can scarcely withstand it, the Christmas message comes. . . . God is in the manger, light in darkness."

I read recently that some people are saying that is difficult to get into the spirit of Christmas this year in light of what has happened to us, been difficult to feel much of anything after September 11.

One evening last week, at the end of a stressful day—a day that began by reading the newspaper account of more violence in the Middle East and the loss of American Marines in Afghanistan, one of those days when whatever can go wrong does—I had been intending all day to get back to the Isaiah passage and that tender green shoot. But I had to go to a Christmas concert. A group by the name of Chanticleer was singing here, in the sanctuary, ordinarily an absolute delight, but at that moment, simply another obligation to be fulfilled, another reason to keep me from what I needed to be doing.

The lights went down in the sanctuary and they sang:

> Lo, how a rose e'er blooming,
> from tender stem hath sprung,
> of Jesse's lineage coming,
> by faithful prophets sung.
> It came a floweret bright
> amid the cold of winter
> when half spent was the night.

And for a blessed moment, the peace of God came—the reality and power and hope of God's peace.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.

Prayers of the People
By John H. Boyle, Parish Associate

God of our years, we give you thanks for the promise of hope the season of Advent brings as we wait for and anticipate the coming once again of the one who was and is the embodiment of your love in the world. We are still waiting, Lord. We are waiting for a war to end, for a terrorist leader and his associates to be brought to justice, for the economy to turn. We're waiting for the time when the wolf shall lie down with the lamb and hurt and destruction will cease to be. We're waiting for you, O God, to reveal yourself anew and afresh.

We're still waiting, Lord, and we confess that we're not very good at it. We're an impatient lot, used to instant access and to getting what we want now, and waiting gets on our nerves. Strange how, when we're not looking, you choose the most unlikely times and places to come to your world and to our hearts.

Then again, you've been waiting also, O God. Waiting for the fullness of time, waiting for us to get ready. Strange, too, how we thought all the waiting was ours to do. Thank you, dear God, for waiting. Teach us how to wait with hope and joy and with the confidence that you will come to us anew, even as you came to your world long ago.

God Eternal, in a world shot through with contingency and change, we have seen some of the mighty put down from their lofty perches and have witnessed those of low degree exalted. Still a great gap exists between the two. May we as your church help to bridge that gap by embracing all who seek refuge here in time of need and by challenging to a new way of life those too self-absorbed to notice the needs of others. Help us faithfully to offer the gift of welcome—even as we welcome a new colleague into our midst—and the ministry of compassion to all who find their way here and to those to whom we find our way so as to offer that gift and that ministry.

In healing mercy and with comforting grace, touch with your presence all who suffer the ravages of illness, the agony of sorrow, the anxiety of uncertainty, the loneliness of rejection, the terror of violence, and the fear of the unknown.

We pray for our nation and her leaders, for the president and his advisors, and for members of the armed forces charged with dangerous duty and exposed to threatening circumstances. Help them and us to trust in your forgiving grace so that we may live courageously with the awesome and sometimes awful ambiguity of our humanness. And keep us from becoming obsessed with the evil we resist, lest it become the god we worship and we become what we worship.

And when in general, O God, evil seems more real and present than otherwise and we are tempted to despair because there is so much death in the world, help us to revel in the particulars of life that remind us of your presence and grace: a child's gleeful laughter as she claps her hands in wide-eyed wonder, the bracing chill of a frosty morn, the caring caress of a loving hand, the

bright colors and lights on a busy avenue, strawberry jam on fresh-baked bread, and the melodious sound of a chorus of voices singing,

> O come, O come, Emmanuel,
> and ransom captive Israel.
> Rejoice! Rejoice!
> Emmanuel shall come to thee, O Israel!

We're still waiting, Lord,
and hoping,
and praying,
in the name of the one for whom we wait, even Jesus our Savior and Lord, and with the words he taught us to pray, saying, Our Father . . .